Health Awareness

GET TESTED FOR HIV:
OUR BATTLE AGAINST AIDS DEPENDS ON IT

by George Roberts, Ph.D.

(NAPSA)—AIDS is hitting African-American communities harder than ever before. One reason is that many African Americans living with HIV don't even know they're infected. That's why it's critical to get tested, even if you don't think you're at risk.

Today, 850,000 to 950,000 people are infected with HIV/AIDS in the United States. One in four don't know they're infected and could be passing the virus to their boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, wives and children.

Given that African Americans account for half of new HIV diagnoses reported in the U.S. in 2001, it is vital that more of us get tested—increasing HIV testing is why National HIV Testing Day was established.

HIV Testing Day events are held nationwide every June, and their message holds true throughout the year: getting tested is one of the most important things you can do as we battle the AIDS crisis in our communities.

Personal experience has taught me the importance of knowing your HIV status. Between 1988 and 1995, I discovered that my little brother, sister and uncle each had been diagnosed with AIDS. The personal tragedy drove me to dedicate my life to fighting the disease and breaking down barriers to getting tested in the African-American community.

A major barrier to testing is fear and stigma. People of color already feel marginalized and

are discriminated against—why would we also want to learn we have HIV? And given that people of color often lack access to quality health care, going to see a doctor—much less taking an HIV test—seems out of reach for many. But organizations and clinics nationwide, many of them run by African Americans for African Americans, are committed to helping you overcome these and other challenges. Getting tested early and often is crucial to fighting AIDS in the African-American community.

Far too many people with HIV, including African Americans, are diagnosed far too late—often when they have become sick with AIDS. That's a long time, when you consider that it usually takes about 10 or more years for HIV to develop into AIDS.

Such delays in testing translate into years of missed treatment and other support that can help you stay healthy, live longer and protect others from infection.

That's why there are efforts nationwide to expand HIV testing

in both medical and non-medical settings.

Getting tested has never been quicker or easier. The rapid HIV test, approved last year by the Food and Drug Administration, gives reliable results in just 20 minutes and can be taken in a variety of settings—such as churches, community centers, and clubs.

Besides the rapid test, there are a number of options for getting tested. Your doctor or local clinic can review these and other choices with you. Or you can get more information by calling CDC's National AIDS Hotline at 1-800-342-AIDS or visiting www.hivtest.org.

What's most important is that you take that first step. If your test result comes back positive, a network of support exists to help you get the treatment, care and prevention services you need.

The unfortunate reality is that, as African Americans, we are at heightened risk for HIV. Not because of our race or ethnicity, but due to a number of social and economic factors that promote HIV transmission. The fortunate reality is that we have a major weapon at our disposal to help battle this disease. That weapon is the HIV test, and each of us has an obligation to use it—for ourselves, for our families and for our community.

• *George W. Roberts works at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, specializing in HIV prevention and training programs for the African-American community.*